

# An Adopted Niece

By PHILIP VERRILL MIGHELS

THEY sat in the warm June sunlight on the doorstep of the small wooden shanty, big Dan White, miner, and Tom Devoe, foster-parent, and for fully two minutes neither spoke. Big Dan had taken off his hat, which he turned and turned in his hands. At length he dropped it and summed up the whole situation.

"As I understand it, Tom," said he, "you and Nancy kind of half way reckon you want to buy that restaurant over to Riley's, and go into the grubbin' business, and your idea is to leave little Miss Devoe here with me for two or three days while you both traipse over there and circumspect the proposition."

Devoe said, "Yep, that's the notion." From his pocket he drew a soiled and folded sheet of paper which he straightened out deliberately. "This here," he added, "is the restaurant's regular way-bill."

"It sounds like good kitchen sense," said Dan, "but this here soup—this consummation. What in blazes is consummation soup?"

"Consummation soup," said Devoe gravely, "is ghost feed. It's just yeller water a little bit diluted."

Dan returned the folded menu to its owner. "I didn't think you knew how to run a restaurant, Tom," said he, "but I guess there ain't no doubt about it. Suppose you make up your mind to buy it and go it a mess, then what about little Miss Devoe?"



SHE WENT ACROSS THE ROOM TO THE BUNK AND LAYING HOLD OF A BOOTJACK..... SHE PROMPTLY CONVEYED IT TO THE FIREPLACE

"I'll come back here and get her, of course," Tom assured him with alacrity. "Me and Nancy don't hanker to run nuthin' without her, the rest of our lives."

Big Dan glanced at his shanty somewhat deliberately. "It don't look as if there's much she could bust while you're gone," he observed, reflectively, "and I ain't hesitating none on that point, Tom, for I'm awful fond of the little gal, as you know, but I was thinkin' more about the restaurant business."

"When was you figurin' to start for Riley's, anyhow?" "Wal—we did want to get away to-day," Tom admitted. "If you ain't willin', Dan, why—"

"To-day?" interrupted the miner. "To-day?—and me all ready to go up to Three-mile Station, and Betsey expectin'—"

His sentence was never concluded, for a light, quick footstep, almost at his elbow, startled and interrupted him suddenly. He turned as a pretty vision made its appearance from around the sunny corner of his cabin. It was Nancy, Tom's wife—rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed, and smiling, and a bag in one hand, while on her strong young arm sat little Miss Devoe herself, roguish, winning, dimpling with smiles and instantly squirming to be placed on the ground, and extending both her baby hands to big Dan, seated on the step.

His hesitation vanished immediately. "Well, well, well!" he exclaimed as he rose and took the youngster in his arms. "Good morning, Miss Devoe. You come to visit Uncle Dan?"

"Baby—come-to—yove—Uncle Dan," said the tiny coquette, and she threw both her plump little arms about his neck and gave him a wonderful hug.

Nancy winked at her husband surreptitiously. "I just said that Uncle Dan would only be too glad to take care of her while we was gone," she said. "I told Tom there wasn't another man in POCO del Oro camp which I'd leave little Prairie with but you, Uncle Dan—not even Uncle Billy Partridge, and the Lord knows he's as fond of Prairie as he can be—and I'm awful glad you want her—and we're sure to be back in a week—and, Tom, the stage is 'most ready, so we'll have to hurry. They've got the trunk and I fetched this bag with Prairie's things—some stockings and dresses—she gits 'em dirty so fast—and wears 'em out—but Uncle Dan can mend them if they get too holey—so we'll just kiss her good-by and get started."

She descended on the speechless Dan, who was once more seated on the step, with little Prairie on his knee, and giving the tot a warm embrace, she kissed her seventeen times in one second, tossed the bag of things inside the house, straightened out her hat upon her head and was ready to depart.

"You don't mean you're goin' right now—on this morning's stage?" said Dan at last, "and maybe goin' to stay away a week?"

"Why, hasn't Tom been tellin' you them was our program?" answered Nancy in surprise. "Then what in the world have you been doing all this morning? Of course that's what we were goin' to do, Uncle Dan, so good-by—we've got to hurry. Tom, come on!"

"All right," said Tom. "You go ahead. I want to speak to Dan for half a minute."

Dan felt not a little abashed at the manner in which the charge had been thrust upon his friend. "I only stayed behind, Dan," said he, "to suggest that if Betsey's on your mind—Betsey Dodd, up to the Three-mile Station—why maybe you could tote Prairie up there to help you do your courtin'. You know what the little gal done for me."

Dan shook his head dubiously. "There's two things sure that ain't no help when a man's foolin' around sparkin'!" he answered. "One's giant powder and the other is a little gal kid like Miss Devoe. I'll fix it up some way, Tom. You git a goin', and good luck with the consummation."

"Guess I'd better," said Tom. "I know you'll take good care of little Prairie and enjoy her visit. So long."

"So long," said Dan. "If you see Billy Partridge, send him up here to the shack."

"Well, Miss Devoe," said Dan to the enterprising little tot, left thus abruptly to his guardianship, "you're doin' pretty fancy so far with my goods and chattels, and the shack comes next, I reckon, for it can't git away—and not a cent of insurance on the place."

The youngster had discovered nothing novel in his pockets, all of which she had rifled many times before. She therefore stood up on his knee and patted his face with extravagant affection.

"What's this?" inquired Dan. "Payin' the damage down in advance for something you want to git at?"

"Baby—do—yove—Uncle Dan," was all the youngster answered, and scrambling out of his arms she started inside the cabin without delay. Dan hastened to follow with commendable alacrity and snatching various household utensils, right and left, began to hang them and stow them away in lofty positions with a zeal that was almost fanatic.

The baby was undismayed. She tried to help. She went across the room to the bunk and laying hold of a bootjack, that certainly resembled an ordinary piece of kitchen fuel, she promptly conveyed it to the fireplace and dropped it in upon the lazily blazing logs. Dan was storing a loaded revolver on the topmost bed of the dwelling. Descending he caught up his extra

Three-mile Station had increased upon him tremendously. "Miss Devoe loves you, Billy, and she won't mind you readin' the news. She'll amuse herself a few, just playin' round. So long. I'll be back before you're through."

He did not wait to argue the matter, but went at once, leaving Billy feebly protesting, while little Miss Devoe already had one small foot through the paper. There was no escape. He therefore placed her gently on the ground and picking up a tiny sliver of wood, held it in his hand for the child to see.

"Tick—Uncle Billy," she said. "Tick—Uncle Billy—tick." He indicated the pocket again and kept on reading. Back and forth and forth the youngster trotted, bringing "ticks" by the scores and dozens, all for the pocket of her friend. Uncle Billy had apparently solved the problem of supplying a child with innocent engaging entertainment.

In the meantime Big Dan had come to the much-belated tryst at Three-mile Station, and Miss Betsey Dodd was exceedingly displeased at his delay. She was a good-sized, brown-eyed, tempery young person on whom Dan's explanation acted peculiarly.

"Do you mean to tell me, Dan White," she said, "that you goin' to be an orphan asylum for that kid for maybe a week? What about you takin' me drivin' to Crystal Springs on Sunday, which is day after tomorrow?"

"Well, I was going to ask if maybe the weather wouldn't be pleasanter a week from Sunday," said the miner. "That's what I come up here to ask."

"Oh, you did, did you? That's all you come up for, was it, and me waitin' two solid hours for nuthin'?" demanded Miss Dodd with ready warmth. "Well, I can just break the news to you right now that I ain't the kind you can git to play no second fiddle—do you understand my conversation?—and you can't have me and no Miss Devoe at the same time, savvy? Now which do you decide to give up—once and for all?"

"Give up?" echoed Dan, deeply perturbed. "Why, Betsey, I shouldn't think, with little Prairie just a baby and you the only gal I ever—"

"That's enough. Don't go no further," interrupted Miss Dodd, imperiously. "Baby or not, it ain't my way of doin'. If you don't propose to give her up, right off prompt, why that settles it all between you and I. Now which of us two is goin' to be?"

"But I couldn't marry Miss Devoe," protested Dan. "You savvy that?"

"Marry?" said Betsey, crimsoning to her crown and fingering to the soles of her shoes. "You never said marry to me before—though I supposed you might git off somethin' of the sort in time, you bein' a man and me a girl—but I don't expect to git flattered to death by that—and if you want to marry me, why prove it by lettin' your little Prairie go and takin' me drivin' next Sunday."

"Do you mean I've got to send her away or you'll never be my wife?" said Dan, very white about the lips. "Is that what you mean?"

"If she stays in your house over Sunday—you bet you and me won't git married!" Miss Dodd replied with emphasis. "And that's all for this mornin'. Good-by."

Dan stood looking at her oddly for a moment, entranced in his honest eyes, then a light of cold determination.

"I can't throw her out like that," he said. "I guess I'll say good-by."

He turned and walked away, Miss Betsey watching, at first indignantly, then more forgivingly, and at last, when he failed to turn and look back, with belated regret in her two brown eyes.

"Dan," she cried. "Dan! Come back!" But the wind was against her. He did not hear, and, topping the ridge, was silhouetted sharply against the sky for a moment, then abruptly disappeared from her view.

Worried and somewhat sore at heart, he made his way across the hills and came at length to his cabin, the end of which he rounded silently. There sat Billy, still engrossed in his paper, and there was the earnest little Prairie still trudging to and from the brush and diligently loading Billy's pocket.

"Tick—Uncle Billy," Dan heard her say, "nother—tick—Uncle Billy." White was tremendously interested to behold this harmless subterfuge for keeping the baby out of mischief. He came forward quietly, while little Miss Devoe was toddling away on her mission. Billy glanced up for a second.

"Hello—back, hey?" he said mechanically, and his mind returned to the reading.

Dan was studying Partridge's clothing curiously. "Billy," he said in a moment, "you must be settin' on some trouble. Your coat's alive with ants."

"What's that?" queried Billy, who had only half heard his friend's remark. "Ants who?"

Then the baby came faithfully to the step as before.

"Tick—Uncle Dan," she said by way of variation. "Tick," and she held up her find. Dan saw a tiny black ant, vainly struggling for its freedom, between her thumb and finger. She had found a practically inexhaustible hill of the little black creatures and for nearly two hours had been fetching them, one by one, to Uncle Billy.

"Man—there's a thousand ants a-crawl'in' on your person!" exclaimed big Dan excitedly. "Billy, git up and shake them off before they begin to eat your carcass!"

"Ants?" cried Partridge, suddenly startled to life. "Ants—great jumps! Jehosophat!"

He swept half a dozen of the frantically running little insects from his hand at a stroke and leaping to his feet threw down his paper, tore off his coat and shook and beat it on the steps like a lunatic.

"Good gosh! there's one inside my shirt!" he said, dropping his coat and wildly hauling at the neck of his garments. "There's another further down inside! There's three on my back! They're on my legs! They're inside of me everywhere! I must have been sittin'—"

The baby interrupted. She had made another successful pilgrimage to her base of supplies and now stood before Billy, faithful to her task.

"Tick—Uncle Billy," she said as before, proffering one more helpless ant to the man who had kept her entertained, "nother—tick."

"Smotherin' angels!" said Billy agitated at this belated discovery, "the doggone little terror of a kid has put at least a million in my pocket! Burn the

coat! Burn it quick! I've got to git fer home like blazes and strip off my duds a month ahead of time!"

He deserted his coat, his hat and his precious paper instantly, and racing down the mountain trail left the helpless Dan absolutely alone and unprotected with the tireless little girl.

Having undertaken to transfer the entire population of the ant-hill to a field of greater usefulness, Prairie had lost no time, during Billy's excitement. While Dan was engaged, in beating Billy's coats she came to the steps again with a captive insect in her grasp.

"Tick," she said, as in expectation of a great reward, "tick—for—Uncle Dan."

"Nasty tick! Throw him away!" said the foster-uncle emphatically. "Baby throw him away!"

"Nasty tick!" repeated the youngster, hurling the ant to the earth as directed, and then, Uncle Dan continuing to be occupied with the infested coat, she trotted off, fetched her ant as before and ejaculating, "Nasty tick!" threw it down on the boot of the miner and trudged patiently off for another.

The following day appeared to justify many of his apprehensions. Little Prairie very early succeeded in filling his Sunday boots with water and sugar, indifferently mixed, and Billy remained away, and Betsey made no sign. Dan was finally obliged to dig up and scatter the ant-hill, after which he adopted a variant on Billy's device. He directed little Prairie's attention to a tiny speck of mica in the sand. This he picked up and placed in a gold pan, resting on the step. "Shine," he said. "Nice shine. Baby git a shine for uncle and put it in the pan."

She went to work at once, most faithfully, and at length big Dan beheld the last of her clean little dresses a torn and dusty ruin, and the knecs of her tiny stockings entirely worn away.

How he got through that day and night he could never have told. Sunday morning he was heart sore and exhausted. Betsey had ignored him utterly, and little Prairie had not. It was a bright, warm morning. Seated on his doorstep he finished a flour-sack garment for the busy little tot in his keeping, and kept her at work fetching tiny specks of dross. When at length the dress he had made was placed upon her he leaned against the shack in relief—and dropped into slumber most profound.

"Oh Lord!" exclaimed Betsey. "What do you know about kids?"

She lost no time in running to the rear of the cabin. There, in half a minute she discovered a hole that something had excavated beneath the cabin's foundation. Down on her knees she dropped at once and applied her eye to the opening.

"I can't see a thing," she announced, "but I know she's there, and prob'ly sound asleep. I went under a house once myself and I know."

"If only she is! If only she is!" said the anguished Dan, in a new, wild hope. "I don't believe she can be, Betsey—but leave me look."

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"Prairie," he called. "Prairie—baby—Miss Devoe—come out to Uncle Dan."

There was no response.

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But the sand lay in a shallow deposit over solid rock. He was baffled in the briefest time. However, he could thrust a part of his head beneath the beam.

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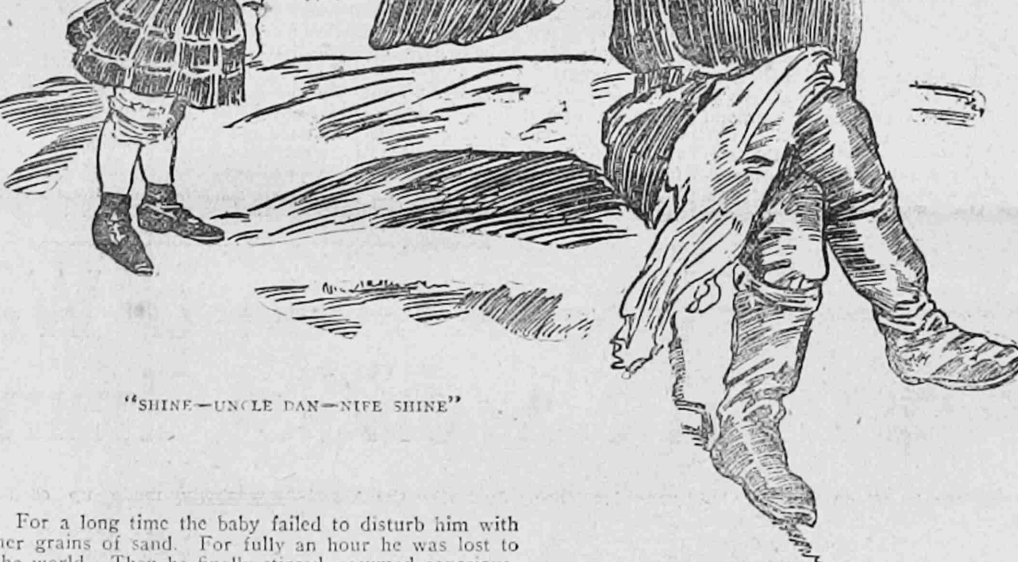
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Dan ran for a crowbar, a block and a beam. The man was so glad he could scarcely think. But with Betsey to boss him and move his blocks and push big rocks beneath the rising shack to hold it while he toiled and pried, he lifted it up as a giant might have done, till it stood at a most amazing angle, and a bottle inside went crashing down and broke on the floor above the baby's head.

Then she waked, and Dan crawled wildly in under there and got her in his arms.

"Baby—was—tired," she vouchsafed in her engaging little way. "Baby—had—a—nap."

Billy Partridge, worried half to death, and having seen the cabin oddly tilted on its base, came charging headlong down the hill, beheld big Dan with Prairie in his arms, and grabbing Miss Betsey crazily about the waist, danced and yelled in his gladness like a boy.



For a long time the baby failed to disturb him with her grins of sand. For fully an hour he was lost to the world. Then he finally stirred, resumed consciousness and sat up to look for the child.

It was all in vain. The hillside was silent, deserted, mocking. In greater and greater circles the man went racing over the slopes and depressions of the hill. To every large rock or clump of rocks he sped in feverish alarm, calling as he went, and feeling a sickening dread increase in his being.

He came upon a rattlesnake, whirling out its warning from the rocks. He killed it and sweat broke out anew upon his temples and a sickening fear took possession of his vitals.

Afraid to leave the place, yet afraid to permit the child to be lost like this any longer, he suddenly ran down the mountain trail as the top of his speed to Billy Partridge's dug-out shack, for he knew he needed help. Billy was there, and instantly partaking of Dan's alarm, he sped with him up to the hill and ran, in a fever of excitement, over all the slope till nearly noon.

"Well, never see her again. She's gone," said Dan in the anguish of despair. "We've got to raise an alarm. We've got to git the whole camp out in the hills. The boys will help us to hunt."

In half an hour there were twenty men swarming the sage-brush slopes in an ever-enlarging circle. The alarm had spread with amazing swiftness. Miners, gamblers, teamsters, engineers—men of every occupation in the camp had responded to the call to find little Prairie Devoe.

Noon had long since gone by; the afternoon was aging. Three times Dan White had returned to his shack, from the hills above, to see if the baby might not have come, through some miracle of chance. Three times he had turned away to scorch as before, with a groan at his lips and a dull, leaden ache in his breast.

At four o'clock he was at home once more. But again, as before, he met only disappointment at the cabin. He faced the merciless expanse of sage-brush once again, but around the curve of the hill, before he could start, appeared a figure that held him for a moment faintly hoping.

It was Betsey Dodd. She had lost her hat; she had run nearly all the way from Three-mile Station; she seemed very much distraught as she hastened, panting, to the cabin.

"I heard—heard little Prairie was lost," she said between her gasps for breath. "I came to help—I didn't mean to sound so nasty—the other day—I—Dan, do you think you've looked in every place where she could be?"

"Everywhere, Betsey; I don't know what to do," said Dan, in his manish helplessness. "Can't you think of somethin'? When I saw you comin' I hoped that maybe you'd had her all the time."

"Oh, you old crank!" said Betsey, not unsympathetically. "Say, Dan, have you looked under the house?"

"No," said Dan, "of course not. She couldn't git under."

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